

Doubt Thou the Stars are Fire by Introvertia

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Summary:

Steve is struggling with his English class, and his entire life, Billy out of purely selfish (and possibly jealous) motives offers to help him write an essay on Hamlet. Drinking and shared secrets ensue.

Doubt Thou the Stars are Fire

Steve's leg was jumping under the table, it had started after the fight with the demogorgon, he was now a leg jogger, a knee bouncer, one of those irritating types that couldn't be still if they were feeling stressed, or impatient, or just existing. Steve was under a lot of stress. If he didn't get through his stupid English class he wasn't going to graduate. He didn't really have to finish high school (his dad had practically said as much, being that no one was going to want to hire him with his GPA, but not to worry he'd get him a desk job even he could handle), but he wanted to, he had to, everyone thought he was a idiot, he wasn't playing sports as well as he used to, he wasn't dating, he was failing at everything outside of fighting monsters, he was good at that... but there weren't any monsters left to fight, the gate was closed, not that any of it made sense to him... parallel universes, alternate planes of existence, how did the kids know about this stuff?

Steve jumped a hand was firmly squeezing his knee under the table. Steve had completely forgotten that Billy Hargrove was sitting next to him in class at the wobbly table in the back, the one everyone avoided and the one Steve always sat at when he was late to class, which was pretty much everyday since winterbreak had ended.

"I swear to God, Harrington. If you keep shaking the table..." Billy sounded more tired than angry and kept his eyes on the paper he was writing on. Steve stared at him, he wanted to be mad, but he just didn't have it in him. Something about that hand firmly clasped on his knee made him feel grounded and present. Steve shook his head. "Okay." Steve said, as he twitched his knee out from under Billy's grip.

Steve sat there knowing he wasn't going to pass the quiz. He glanced over at Billy's paper, it was three quarters full with neat handwriting. Nothing was crossed out, there were no eraser tracks.

Steve started writing, he hated writing essays, he hated English classes, and reading Shakespeare was the worst. He drummed his

pencil on the desk, then stopped when he heard Billy grunt in irritation.

Steve's mind raced around, and around, he'd already forgotten the question for the essay. He'd done okay with Romeo and Juliet, it was easy, but Hamlet, Hamlet was kind of good, but mostly terrible... and confusing. Steve reread the questions on the board over and over, nothing was sticking, his thoughts just slid out of his head, he had to focus but it'd be easier to just give up.

Steve, with herculean effort wrote the answers to the questions he knew first, the ones he kind of thought he knew last and the ones he had no idea how to answer he left blank and prayed for a passing grade. Most of the students had turned in their papers and were now reading, working on homework, or attempting to pass notes.

Steve didn't think his parents were planning on going to his graduation, none of the other "good" families had kids graduating in his year, so it's not like they had to be seen. His mom had mentioned photos, and told him she was going to order his class ring. Soon she'd be getting him measured for his cap and gown. Steve started sweating. His knee started jogging. He gripped the side of the desk and chewed on his pencil. He tried to tell himself none of this mattered. He was going to finish high school, either graduate or not, and none of it mattered, nothing mattered. No one gave a shit, he'd be fine. Again, a hand gripped his knee, Steve held still feeling the pressure.

"Harrington." Billy sounded amused this time, Steve blinked, keeping his gaze down. Billy's hand remained, it was kind of nice. Someone holding on to him, keeping him still, when it felt like he was going to crawl out of his skin.

"Sorry." Steve said faintly, not looking at Billy, he got up and walked to the teacher's desk to turn his paper in, Mr Bayles reached out and took the quiz from Steve, his expression sympathetic.

"I tried, I swear." Steve blurted, as the bell went off signaling the end of class. Steve walked back to the table and got his backpack and slung it over his shoulder. Billy was slipping on his denim jacket eyeing Steve, his expression unreadable. Steve said nothing and

walked out of the classroom.

Steve got to his locker and had just popped it opened when Nancy came around the corner, she looked very cute, it kind of made it worse when she looked extra cute, she was so tiny, and smart, and brave... He tried to smile, but it felt like it was stuck somewhere between Elvis's weird lip snarl and a grimace.

"Hey, me and Jonathan are going to the Hawk tonight, Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, want to come?"

"I, eh... I really want to, but," Steve had been canceling on them for over a month now and was running out of excuses. Nancy raised her eyebrows waiting for him to finish waffling, but lost her patience.

"C'mon, it'll be fun, you never hangout with us anymore."

"He can't, Wheeler, we're studying." Steve turned around and there was Hargrove, Steve had never heard a more ridiculous lie in his life, but for a brief moment he'd believed him, Billy had just lied as easily as breathing.

"What?" Nancy looked at Steve.

"Studying, I know you've heard of it Wheeler." Billy quipped.

"With you?" Nancy looked at Billy from head to toe, she clearly hadn't forgiven him for beating up Steve, none of Steve's friends had.

"Why not me?" Billy sounded uncharacteristically defensive.

"Hamlet." Steve said as explanation.

"Oh, you hate Shakespeare." Nancy sounded a lot less surprised, "Why didn't you tell me, I could have helped you, I still can."

"Nah, it's cool, um, Billy and I have the same class, so it's just, you know easier, and besides, you and Jon have a good time. I'll catch it next weekend."

"Well, if you change your mind let me know, I mean, if you need more help studying." Nancy looked at Billy, she clamped her lips in thought, but just shook her head.

"Thanks." Steve nodded cramming his backpack in his locker.

"I'll see you Monday."

"Yeah."

"Did she seriously just invite you to be the third wheel on her date with Byers, what a classy bitch." Billy said watching Nancy walk away.

"Don't be an asshole." Steve muttered, looking at Billy.

"Don't be so God damned pussy whipped."

"I'm *not* pussy whipped, she's my friend."

"Whatever you say, Harrington."

"Haven't you ever been friends with an ex before? What are you twelve?" Steve leaned on his locker looking at Billy, his eyes narrowed. Billy tilted his head considering Steve.

"You need to write that extra credit essay, I read your quiz, it sucked."

"What do you mean you read my quiz?"

"I was sitting right next to you, it sucked. You worked on it for like twenty minutes and you only answered half the questions."

"Well, yeah, it's a hard test, I don't do well with written tests, it's not a big deal." Steve's voice was getting louder, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, no longer leaning on the lockers.

"I don't even know why we're reading Hamlet, it's a play, it's meant to be watched, nobody talks like that anymore!" Steve was practically yelling. Billy nodded watching him, a shadow of a smile playing in the corners of his mouth.

"It's easy, if you want help, I'll help, relax, Harrington."

"I am relaxed." Steve threw his arms up looking wound as tight as a spring.

"I can see that." Billy rolled his eyes and fixed Steve with a look.

"Why..." Steve started to ask, but cut himself off, "Okay, good, fine, let's study, tonight." Steve opened up his notebook and wrote his address and drew a little map in three lines.

"This is my place, come over at 8, and help me out." Steve tore the sheet out and clapped it into Billy's hand.

"Later, Harrington." Billy nodded, folded the paper and put it in his back pocket and walked away. Steve wondered what the hell he was thinking, and also felt a weird little thrill at the thought of Hargrove coming over to help him study.

When Steve got home there was a note on the refrigerator from his mother, he'd forgotten that they were going to Chicago. They went there a lot, Indianapolis too, sometimes Manhattan but they never invited him, he used to beg to go, now he swore he'd never go anywhere with them. Steve didn't actually read the note he just tore it down and waded it up, the notes always said the same thing, be back on this day, don't forget to do that thing, blah, blah, blah. They'd been leaving him on his own since he was twelve. Sometimes for a solid week. At first Steve felt really grown up, and kind of special, none of his friends were allowed to stay home alone for days on end, of course he wasn't permitted to tell anyone that they left him alone, as he got older he felt different about it. Sometimes, maybe more than sometimes, he wondered if he'd been a mistake, or just you know, an obligation. Get married, have a career, buy a house, have a kid. Steve went upstairs and put on some music, he pulled out his paperback copy of Hamlet and paced while reading. He flipped through the pages and stopped at random place.

Hamlet: O God, I could be bounded in a nut shell and count

*myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I
have bad dreams.*

Steve blinked at the passage, and read it again. He didn't know what the hell that meant. Steve thought about his last nightmare; he'd been sitting by the side of the pool, all alone, he'd been younger, maybe ten years old, just a little kid, he could see the demogorgon swimming in his pool, he was too afraid to move, too afraid to call out for help, it was moving closer...he'd awoken to the weather report playing on his alarm-clock-radio, it had pushed his dream into the back of his mind, he hadn't really recalled it till he read those two lines. He paced more and fanned the pages under his thumb.

He looked out of his bedroom window and down on the pool. In the summers growing up he'd lived in that pool. He could remember being small and swimming while his parents lounged in the hot sunshine, and hearing his father talking about boarding school, and that it was probably a good idea, but that it was just too expensive. Steve hadn't know what boarding school was at first, but when he found out he'd felt crushed. He was tired of feeling like a burden and an afterthought. He flipped the book open again.

*Hamlet: I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is
southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.*

Steve frowned and laid back on his bed. He rested the paperback on his stomach, he didn't want to think anymore, if he knew how to get a hold of Billy he'd call him and cancel. Steve rolled over on his side pulling the blankets with him till he was swaddled. There was a very small part of him that wished there was a monster to fight, something to pulp, something to make him choose to live, something to make him fight to live. Sometimes he felt crazy, on edge and lost, even

when he was small he'd get anxious, was he saying the right things? Doing the right thing? He'd try to hide behind his mother's skirts at parties, there were always parties, business parties, neighborhood parties, city council parties and Steve had to be there, learn to shake hands, keep his hands out of his pockets, sit up straight, *don't embarrass your father Steve...* and his dad would shove him forward, and if he grabbed his dad's hands he'd get a stealthy pinch near his armpit, that broke him of trying to grab onto his dad's hand.

"Fake it till you make it." Steve whispered. He pulled the book open again, and read aloud, "I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw".

It kind of made sense, that Hamlet wasn't totally mad, just maybe overwhelmed by his dead father's demand for revenge, his duty, Hamlet knew he couldn't trust Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they acted like his friends, maybe they had been his friends for a while, but they were just posers by the time they came to visit, it was to appease his uncle and mother, they showed up to get what they wanted and didn't give a shit about Hamlet, like Tommy and Carol in the end, they didn't care about him, they were just there to get what they wanted, to swim in his pool and drink his parents booze, to have somewhere to fuck where they wouldn't get busted. Steve couldn't believe Hamlet was starting to make sense, but how the hell could he explain that to anyone? He couldn't write about his life to explain Hamlet to Mr Bayles, he'd think Steve was an egomaniac. Steve frowned, he was getting a serious headache. He nestled deeper in his blankets.

Billy knocked on Steve's door at 8:15. The house was big, not that Billy was surprised, or impressed, it was just, big, bigger than he'd thought it would be. It was late May and the nights were still cold, he scowled at the chill in the air and leaned on the doorbell. He could hear the sound of someone running down a flight of steps, the door was pulled open.

"I get it, I get it. I get it. I get the play, and I don't want to study. I can't write the essay, but I understand it, maybe I can do an oral presentation or something, like if he would just ask me the questions

and I'll tell him the answers, but to write it down would be totally nuts. Well, that stuff that Ophelia says, about the owl, that makes zero sense, I think she was crazy, but I don't know if he drove her crazy, maybe it was from grief. Maybe."

Billy tracked Steve with his eyes, standing in the doorway, Steve's hair was ruffled sideways and he had a blanket over his shoulders, his shoelaces were untied and his t shirt was twisted and hiked up a bit around his waist.

"She thinks she's being punished by God, that she's committed a sin, accidentally, and that losing her dad and being knocked up and rejected by Hamlet is like, karma, at least that's one theory. There are conflicting theories on that line, she says, 'we know what we are now, but not what we may become',"

"What?" Steve looked at Billy with his big dark eyes, looking lost and restless.

"How many times have you read it?" Billy sighed.

"I uh, I don't know, maybe one and a half, but it's starting to make more sense, I think."

Billy rolled his eyes and walked inside.

"You got anything to drink?" Billy pointed, "Is the kitchen over this way?"

"Sure, yeah, um, follow me." Steve walked around him leading the way, his blanket wrapped over his shoulders trailing like a ridiculous cloak.

Billy followed Steve, and resisted the urge to step on the hem of the blanket. Once in the kitchen Steve opened the refrigerator door and squinted inside.

"Eh, Coke, Milk, OJ, Miller?"

"Got anything good?"

"Scotch?"

“Sure.” Billy leaned on the counter, he turned his cigarette pack in his fingers.

Steve went to a cabinet and pulled out a bottle of Glenlivet scotch, he grabbed a pair of tumblers and some ice from the freezer.

“Okay, maybe I don’t get it, but what I do get, I can’t explain without sounding like a headcase.” Steve filled two tumblers nearly to overflowing and handed one to Billy who took a sip and felt the smoothest burn go down his throat, he glanced at the label appreciatively. He took another sip his eyes on Steve.

Steve was walking back and forth, he took a long drink and then started rambling again.

“Why does he say that thing about sleeping to dream if he has nightmares?”

“Because he’s not sure life is worth living, he’s not really talking about sleeping, he’s talking about death.”

“What?” Steve paused mid pace, and looked at Billy. Billy fixed him with a withering look.

“You need to read it again, you’re missing all the good stuff.”

“What good stuff?”

“The fucking metal shit, dude, he’s not even sure he wants to live.”

“Did you just say Hamlet is metal?” Steve raised his eyebrows, he’d finally held still for more than two seconds.

“Yeah, cause it is. It has everything, sex, revenge, murder, ghosts - fucking dark shit.”

“Huh.”

“Reading Hamlet one and a half times isn’t going to be enough if you want to get it, it’s not that simple, Harrington.”

“You know what,” Steve pointed at Billy, “You sound like you really

care about Hamlet, like it's, important."

Billy looked at Steve, his brows furrowed and sighed heavily.

"I just get it, unlike most people. You know, some kids watched Mr Rogers and Sesame Street, I got Shakespeare, it's just something that I was raised with." Billy paused and looked at his glass, the scotch matched the color of Steve's eyes, a tiger brown, almost golden, almost orange, but richer. He could feel Steve watching him, being still and very focused for once.

"Will you watch it with me? I've got the old timey one on video, the one with T.E. Lawrence."

Billy choked on a snigger and wiped the corner of his mouth.

"You mean Laurence Olivier." Billy cackled.

"Yeah, that guy." Steve felt like he should be embarrassed but shrugged it off, feeling curious and surprisingly at ease with Billy drinking scotch in his kitchen.

"Were you a theater kid, back in California?"

"What, no, no fucking way, not with all those..." Billy stopped himself, he almost said faggots, it was as if he'd accidentally punched himself in the gut, that wasn't why he never took drama, he never did theater because of Neil, because Neil hated the idea of Billy taking after his mother, and told him it was what faggots did, *theater is for faggots, no son of mine*.

"I never had the balls, but my mom was an actress, after she got married she gave it up, she read me Shakespeare all the time, at bedtime, on bus rides, at the beach, over lunch, she didn't even need the books, she just knew it, all of it. She could have taught Shakespeare better than Mr Bayles." Billy's voice got soft and low, his gaze cast down.

"That's really cool." Steve said earnestly. He'd never heard Billy speak of his mother, or California, to Steve, Billy was a mystery, an angry hostile mystery, but just then Billy looked, soft, almost babyfaced lost in memories, it made him look tender and kissable. Steve grabbed the bottle and refilled both of their glasses.

“Come on upstairs, I need to watch this, just hang out with me, in case I have questions.”

Billy followed Steve, upstairs and into his bedroom. Billy stopped at the threshold and looked around the room, his eyes traveled around, not really resting on anything.

“Come in, I got the tape here. ” Steve knelt in front of a TV with an built in tape player, it was small and expensive looking. Billy took a sip of his drink and looked out the window and down to the pool, the lights were soothing, glowing pale blue, the pool was uncovered and he’d have found a way to get in it if it wasn’t so damned cold. Steve grabbed the remote off the top of the TV and sat on the edge of his bed. Billy looked at the bed and then the desk chair, wondering if he should roll it over.

“Sit down. I’m not gonna bite.”

“That’s a shame.” Billy said under his breath.

“What?”

“Danke schön.”

“Oh.”

“You speak German?”

“No, French and some Spanish.”

“I thought that was German.”

“It’s just a phrase, everyone knows phrases.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” Steve scooted back on the bed, moving the pillows behind himself and kicking off his shoes, he watched Billy in his peripheral vision.

Billy toed off his boots and sat next to Steve, neither of them

touching. The tape started and the opening score flooded Billy with memories, the black and white images reminded him of being small and content, leaning on his mother she smelled like coppertone and magnolias, the pair of them sitting in the middle of their sagging couch, the sound on low and her voice melodic and soft as she recited the lines with the actors, adding her own inflections encouraging him to speak the lines with her. Billy's recollections were soon interrupted the bed being shaken. He looked away from the screen and his eyes rested on Steve's socked foot, it was wagging furiously, *the boy can not hold still*, Billy thought in exasperation. Billy reached over to grab Steve's knee, at the exact same time Steve shifted lower on the bed, Billy's hand clapped down firmly on Steve's thigh. Neither of them moved.

Steve's racing mind was suddenly very quiet, and all he could feel was the delicious pressure of Billy's grip setting his skin on fire and sending electrical currents up into his groin.

Billy licked his lips slowly, and swallowed, he'd checked out Steve's lean thighs many times, but holding on to one of them was far superior to looking. Billy flushed but he didn't remove his hand.

"You're shaking your foot, Harrington."

"Yeah, I mean, I didn't realize," Steve's voice was low, his eyes rested on Billy's hand, "Sorry about that."

"Watch the movie." Billy ordered. His hand relaxed but didn't move.

Neither of them could focus on the film.

Steve reached over to his bedside table and picked up his glass of scotch and drained it. Billy's hand slowly moved away he leaned over the opposite side of the bed and picked up his glass off the floor. Billy sucked on the inside of his cheek briefly, and tipped down the rest of the scotch from his glass. He pulled a crumpled pack of smokes from his pocket and his lighter and lit up. He could feel Steve's eye on him and waited to see what he'd say. Steve didn't complain. Billy sat back using his empty glass as an ashtray.

Steve blinked at the screen, he folded and unfolded his hands on his belly, he could smell Billy's cologne and shampoo. Billy had showered before coming over, Steve was certain of it.

Hamlet was swearing Horatio and the others to never speak of what happened that night, never to speak of the ghost, Steve couldn't help but think about the gate, the demodogs and all the things he had to keep to himself, he knew he could talk to Hop, but he was plenty busy, Nancy had Jon, Joyce was cool, but she had her hands full with Will, Dustin had the rest of the party, everyone had someone to talk to, or someone to look after them or look after, everyone but him.

Billy glanced down at Steve's fingers, they were clenching and unclenching. Billy chased around an ice cube in his glass with the stub of his cigarette, listening to it hiss until it was extinguished. Steve was jogging his leg, it was vibrating the whole bed. Billy sighed loudly, but Steve didn't stop.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Steve repeated the line in a rushed mumble, all he could picture was the demogorgon at the Byers house, it was so tall, its face splitting open like a fucked up Venus-Flytrap, the lights had been flickering like crazy.

Billy rested his hand on Steve's, it was more startling than the other touches, somehow more intimate, more bold.

"You're shaking."

"Just nervous energy."

"You, your whole body, is shaking."

"Oh," Steve turned his palm upward and grasped Billy's hand, he exhaled slowly, but he could feel himself still trembling. "Tell me something?"

"What?"

“Just talk to me.” Steve picked up the remote with his other hand and paused the tape.

“About what?”

“I don’t know, California, did you live near the beach?” Steve squeezed Billy’s hand, he couldn’t control himself, he was shaking, he wondered if he was having a nervous breakdown right there in front of Billy.

“Yeah, I was near the beach, we’d go down there all the time, just hop on the bus, sometimes walk if cash was tight.” Billy paused, he looked at Steve’s hand in his, he remembered shoving him back down on the floor at the gym, he’d wanted Steve to get up and fight him, he’d just wanted to fight someone that day, and Steve, King Steve had a reputation to defend, but Steve hadn’t taken the bait.

“Is your name Billy, like your real name, or is it short for William?” Steve didn’t know why he was asking, he just wanted to hear Billy talk.

“Is your real name Steve or Steven?”

“Just Steve.”

“Huh.”

“You never call me Steve.”

“It’s William, my mom loved Shakespeare. But don’t get cute and start calling me William, asshole.” Billy watched a small smile appear on Steve’s face, it made a tension he hadn’t known was in the middle of his chest uncoil.

“You were named after William Shakespeare?” Steve looked at Billy with a big grin.

“Yeah, who the fuck were you named after?”

“My grandfather.”

“That’s original.”

“Nah.” Steve squeezed Billy’s hand and slowly released it, he wasn’t shaking anymore, he tilted till his shoulder was against Billy’s, he could feel the heat radiating from him, it soaked through his shirt and into Steve’s skin.

“What’s your middle name?”

“Fuck off.”

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“I came over to help you study, not tell you my life story.”

“Thanks.”

“Okay.” Billy replied vaguely.

“You’ve helped me a lot.” Steve tipped his head and rested it on Billy’s shoulder. Billy scowled, but held still.

“What are you doing?”

Steve shrugged beside him, “Leaning on you, buzzed on scotch, watching Hamlet, like any red blooded American teenager would do on a Friday night.” Steve held his breath waiting for what Billy would do or say, and didn’t exhale till he heard Billy laugh.

“You’re nuts.” Billy observed mildly, he could feel Steve sitting up beside him and then leaned into him again.

They sat in silence for a spell, Billy could hear their breathing sync. He didn’t want to be anywhere else, but knew it would end eventually, Steve would send him home, they’d go back to just being classmates, rivals on the court unless they were playing another team, this was just a moment that was going to be ripped away, like all good things it was going to be taken from him. Billy had told himself maybe they’d study, or maybe they’d mess around, it hadn’t mattered, but it did matter, he liked Steve, and everyday he liked him more. Now he was here in his house, telling Steve about his life, and Steve was really into it, but for how long? Billy’s heart started racing, his stomach tightening. He had to get out of there, he didn’t want to wait to be told to go home.

“I gotta go.”

“What?” Steve sounded startled, like he’d been woken from a dream.

“I said I’ve got to go.”

Billy grabbed his boots off the floor and walked out of the room and down the stairs. Steve was hot on his trail, just before they reached the foyer Steve jumped down the last three steps and got in Billy’s path blocking him, their chests collided and their noses brushed and for a moment neither of them moved.

“Don’t go.”

“What?”

“I said don’t go. Just stay here unless you want to go, but know that I don’t want you to go.”

“Everything’s really fucked up.” Billy mumbled.

“Yeah, I know, me too,” Steve attempted to search Billy’s eyes, but Billy looked away. “How come you’ve been sitting at the wobbly table in English? You never used to be late.” Steve asked quickly, before he lost his nerve.

“You’re an idiot.”

“I’ve heard that before.” Steve said flatly.

“Maybe I sit there because that’s where the last person in the door has to sit, and you’ve been late to class like clockwork since January.”

“Yeah, I noticed that you were late all the time around February, and that’s where you usually sit, so who’s the idiot now?” Steve retorted wryly.

Billy’s eyebrows twitched, and slow smile started to curl up the corner of his plump lips, he looked down realizing that Steve had

taken hold of his hands. Steve pulled him towards the kitchen.

“Are you hungry? I make a pretty good burger, I’m actually a really good cook. I’ve been cooking for myself since I was a little kid, I can make spaghetti, cereal, oatmeal, sandwiches, scrambled eggs, um... toast, pancakes, sandwiches,”

“You already said sandwiches.” Billy interjected.

“Well there’s more than one kind of sandwich.” Billy allowed himself to be towed into the kitchen. Steve got busy pulling together all the fixings for burgers.

“Did your parents divorce?”

“No, my mom died.”

“Oh shit, I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” Normally Billy hated it when people said they were sorry, but the way Steve looked at him, like he felt physically pained, as if he was literally touched by grief at the thought of Billy losing his mother, it just gave meaning to words that had felt so empty from everyone else.

“Do you have any cheese?” Billy changed the subject.

“Cheddar?”

“Yeah.” Billy leaned on the counter and smoked, wondering how he could go from feeling a burning coal in the pit of his stomach to a little kernel of hope in his chest so quickly. It was all Harrington’s fault, Billy mused. He liked watching Steve cook, he liked watching Steve do anything. The shaking had been a little alarming, he’d never seen Steve like that.

“You’ve seen some serious shit, haven’t you, Harrington?”

Steve flipped over a hamburger patty, and sprinkled some pepper on it.

“Yeah, you could say that.” Steve rolled his right shoulder, like a boxer’s tell, but didn’t say anything else.

“Me too.”

The counter was a mess by the time Steve was done, but the burgers were plated and smelled amazing. Steve handed Billy a bag of potato chips and a fresh bottle of scotch, and carried both of their plates and a couple cans of coke upstairs to his room. Once they were settled on the bed Steve put the tape back on with the volume so low it was nearly muted. Steve sat close enough to Billy that their shoulders were touching. They ate in comfortable silence. When they were done with the food Steve put the plates on the floor and without a word folded his arms around Billy's torso. Billy stiffened and looked at Steve with an arched brow.

“What?” Steve challenged, but didn't wait for an answer, he just leaned into Billy and watched Laurence do his thing on the tiny TV screen, the big soliloquy was getting started.

“To be, or not to be--that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” Billy's voice was soft but certain, “Or to take arms against a sea of troubles. And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep-- No more--and by a sleep to say we end.” Billy rested his chin on Steve's head, he sounded exhausted, but also calm.

Steve shifted sitting up and twisted around till he was facing Billy, it was the first time he realized how similar they were, and concurrently recalled how very different for the hundredth time. Both of them alone, or maybe just lonely, fighting their secret battles and trying to keep up a good front. Billy's lashes looked glossy, but his eyes were dry and clear. Steve wondered if he'd been crying, maybe just a little.

“You really know all of Hamlet?”

“Yes, I wasn't bullshitting you, Harrington. I was raised on the stuff.” Billy replied as he picked up the remote and turned off the TV.

“I didn't think you were, I'm just impressed, you're really smart.”

“Why shouldn't I be?”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t be, you’re smart and that’s fucking hot, okay? I don’t even like Shakespeare, but you knowing it makes it hot. Stop being so defensive, you dick, take a compliment.” Steve’s expression was sour, his eyes were squinted in frustration, his hair askew from leaning into Billy.

“You just called me a dick.”

“I said nice things, too.” Steve griped.

“Yeah.” Billy nodded, and snorted a laugh.

“This is ridiculous.” Steve threw his hands up, Billy caught his face and kissed him, it was a little rough at first, but Steve expertly turned into the kiss, and their mouths aligned hotly, lips parted, tongues exploring.